



FOUR Generations in Carnival

Text by Denise Lee
Photography by Steve Keith

Carnaval season in Aruba brings the whole family out into the streets to celebrate. Perhaps one or two members of a family—mother/daughter and sister/sister combos are common—will participate in parades while their loved ones cheer them on from the sidelines. But the passion for Carnival burns so intensely in some Aruban families that several generations of the same family participate together in parades. Oncha Arends—endearingly known as Mama Oncha—her daughter, her three grandchildren, and most recently, her great-granddaughter represent one such multi-generational Carnival family who will be seen in the streets this year.





The family's strong connection to Carnival dates back to the 1940s, when Mama Oncha's mother, Veneranda Arends, was a member of Oranjestad's now-defunct Tivoli Club, one of Aruba's oldest social clubs. In 1942, Tivoli began throwing costume parties like the ones already being celebrated since the 1930s in the social clubs of San Nicolas, the birthplace of Carnival. When the end of World War II was announced in 1945, all the clubs took their gatherings to the streets to celebrate and parade with steel pans. Finally, in 1953, all of the festivities were organized by a central committee to form Aruba's first official Carnival celebration.

Mama Oncha fondly recalls embroidering her own Carnival costumes as a little girl and teenager. She remembers the hours of hand-sewing—not gluing, she is quick to point out—colorful sequins to the costume fabric. She even won a few Carnival titles: Miss Tivoli, Miss Congeniality, and Mrs. Tivoli. And of course, she introduced her daughter, Lienchi Merryweather, to Carnival.

Lienchi was ten years old when the Tivoli Club started the Torch Parade—the parade that kicks off the Carnival season—and she helped organize this parade when she was old enough. Throughout the years, Lienchi also earned her fair share of titles: Tivoli Children's Queen, Tivoli Queen, and the runner-up for the Carnival Queen title in 1978.

Although Lienchi's Carnival career began just about as soon as she could walk, Lienchi's commitment to Carnival increased tenfold when she agreed—along with Joselin Baroso-Croes—to take over the organization of a group initially founded by three women of the Tivoli Club. In 1999, this newly reorganized group—which welcomed anyone who wanted to join—made its first appearance in Carnival with the presentation of its "Viva Las Vegas" theme. Because the members of this group preferred to drink champagne along the parade route, they named themselves Champagne in 2000.

It comes as no surprise that all three of Lienchi's children have followed in the footsteps of their mother, aunts (Lienchi's sisters, who are also part of Champagne), grandmother, and great-grandmother. Melony, the oldest of the three, has been in Carnival since she was literally a baby. In 1992, she represented Oranjestad as Aruba's Children's Queen; in 2001, she was named the

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Youth Champagne Queen and was the runner-up for the Youth Carnival Queen title. Misha, Melony's younger sister, wasn't always so keen on Carnival. Although she enjoyed decorating the parade floats as a young girl, Misha shied away from dressing up and participating in the parades. However, for lack of a babysitter, Misha was obligated to join Carnival parades with the rest of her family. When Misha became a teenager—and finally abandoned the tomboy stage—she shocked everyone when she was chosen the Carnival Queen of Juliana School. Ever since, she has been a Champagne Carnavalista like her mother and sister. Twelve-year-old Matthew Merryweather is also Carnival royalty: Representing Champagne, he became the Prince of Carnival one year. This year, he is opting to help deliver ice and water to the members of Champagne as they dance through the streets during Carnival.

At 76 years old, Mama Oncha has not outgrown Carnival; in fact, her passion for street celebrations only gets stronger each year. This year, she plans to ride along in a moving bar that serves champagne to the group's members. Champagne's presence in the various parades of Carnival would be incomplete without Oncha, for she plays such an integral role within the group. Oncha's house serves as Carnival headquarters, with 800 to 1000 people—possibly more—going in and out of her house each year for Carnival. From 4 PM to 9 PM every night just before Carnival begins, Mama Oncha's house is simply chaos. Even though she complains to Lienchi now and then about the constant flux of visitors, Oncha wouldn't have it any other way. Carnival is in her blood, after all, and she is Champagne's mama.

Oncha's great-granddaughter, now one year old, will represent the family's fourth generation participating in Carnival this year. A strong sense of Carnival pride undoubtedly runs deep in Mama Oncha's family, and it seems as though this pride will not diminish anytime soon. ¶